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Singing Overseas

Apollo Quartet's South Pacific tour ended with a big bang

By KIM HILL



The 1960-61 Apollos were Gene (Michael) Cousins '62, Jim Stahly '62, Roger Rilling '63 and Doug Amman '61. Accompanist Sam Anliker '61 is seated in front.

July 1962, on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. With goggles on and eyes shut tight, five young men from Illinois Wesleyan lie on their backs as the heat wave from a nuclear detonation 10 miles out hits them like someone opened the door to a gigantic oven. Seconds later, the huge concussion rolls over them.

These young men were not sailors or marines, but rather singers and musicians in the Apollo Quartet. Their witness of a nuclear test explosion was only one of their experiences during the quartet's eight-week tour entertaining troops in the South Pacific for the United States Special Services.

The Apollos of the 1961-62 school year occasionally discussed how they might parlay their college success into a post-college career, but no serious plans emerged until early in the spring semester, when a surprising opportunity arose. Early in 1962, a chance for something big fell into their laps.

Robert C. Price '50, a member of IWU's Admissions staff, had served with the Armed Forces Professional Entertainment Branch in Europe. He knew the Apollos might be able to secure a gig entertaining U.S. troops at bases around the globe. The quartet quickly determined an overseas tour could be a great opportunity. "We were kind of late to get into it, so the European spots were already booked up," Jim Stahly '62 recalls. "But there was an opportunity in the South Pacific."

The other Apollo members were Doug Amman '61, who was a graduate student at the time; Gene (Michael) Cousins '62; Roger Rilling '63 and Alan Harler '62, accompanist. The group left the day after graduation in June, not exactly as professionals because they were not paid, but it didn't really matter. Stahly says today that even as the 20-somethings they were then, the Apollos recognized this was a special, even once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The Special Services arranged for their flights (for many in the group, their first-ever plane trip) and lodging, most often on base. As they toured in Hawaii, Guam, Japan, Okinawa Island, Taiwan and Korea, they performed standards such as "There Is Nothing Like a Dame," "Lonesome, That's All" and "Ol' Man River." Stahly has preserved a poster from the tour announcing the Hawaiian show. It bills the "versatile" group's many talents, including soft-shoe numbers and comedy monologues.

“As we left on the general’s plane hours later, the mushroom cloud was still visible in the distance,” Stahly adds. “It was one of those experiences that stays with you for the rest of your life.”

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